1st Place 1995 McArthur Award Winner

# Leadership on Future Fields: Remembering the Human Factor in War

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***Doctrine must pay more than lip service to battlefield morale, both in human and organizational terms. Units must be structured and employed to minimize the stress placed on the soldiers who serve in them, not just to maximize their weapons' destructive potential. The segregation of tactics and leadership in our training publications is symptomatic of how deeply we neglect the human factor in war.***

DOCTRINE, SO EXCELLENT in many respects, suffers greatly from its neglect of the human factor in war—something all leaders should still consider important. For example, the 1993 US Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, defines friction in war as the accumulation of chance errors, unexpected difficulties and confusion of battle that impede both sides.[1] No gut-wrenching terror here, no cowardice, no shirking and no agonized indecision. Very little, it seems, hampers smooth operations that could not be fixed with better intelligence, planning and communications. But Carl von Clausewitz, the concept's originator, added a fourth ingredient to friction—*danger*. "War is the realm of danger," he wrote, and its presence inspires fear; fear, in turn, undermines the soldier's desire or ability to carry out the commander's will, thereby multiplying the sources of friction.[2]

Any modern army, dependent on the synchronization of so many elements for its combat power, is perhaps more vulnerable than ever to friction's debilitating effects, yet we pay little attention to one of friction's primary sources. War in the information age will strain the sinews of leadership in ways we can barely imagine. The conventional battlefield will be a place of physical isolation, fluidity and instantaneous destruction inflicted at an unprecedented pace. Soldiers may wield "push buttons" more often than bayonets, but metal will still tear flesh with sickening regularity—often without warning. Realistic training and unit cohesiveness can attenuate some of fear's effects, but there is no substitute for strong battlefield leadership in steeling soldiers for the real and perceived dangers of future war.

Ardant du Picq wrote that "Man is flesh and blood; he is body and soul. And, strong as the soul often is, it cannot dominate the body to the point where there will not be a revolt of the flesh and mental perturbation in the face of destruction."[3] Keeping this in mind, fear's debilitating effects can be divided into two general categories: preoccupation with self-preservation rather than mission accomplishment; and mental paralysis.

The instinct for self-preservation is a useful part of any soldier's character, instilling a certain and necessary amount of prudence in dangerous environments. But the danger zone has expanded considerably in the past 20 years and will continue to grow until it virtually encompasses the entire battlefield. Moreover, the individual soldier will have less warning of danger's presence and less ability to defend against it. Highly lethal and precise weaponry, often guided by implacable machinery, renders even the strongest defensive position unsafe. Danger penetrates the blackest night and ranges far beyond the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA). Sensors can detect the slightest activity so that movement, electromagnetic emission, firing and even the simple act of warming up an engine can make the soldier a target. Further, maneuver warfare's nature intermixes armies amid the swirl of combat so that the whole notion of "forward" and "rear" areas becomes moot. Every action, even minor routines performed miles from the enemy, becomes a calculated risk. Thus, the fear of death will not be limited to those directly confronting the enemy but will extend throughout the battlefield's depth—a constant, nagging companion of every soldier, 24 hours a day.

Consequently, combat stress—usually associated with the maneuver arms—will affect all branches

more or less continuously. In fact, by virtue of his greater protection and lesser worth as a target, the infantryman in his foxhole will arguably be safer than the clerk in a command post. The only historical parallel to this constant nervous strain was that experienced by World War I trench-warfare veterans. Even those unfortunates had long spells of rest in rear billets away from the firing line. Modern warfare will offer few secure rear-area billets.

At the sharp end, even low-level stress will be punctuated by periodic spasms of intense violence extending well beyond the FEBA. Casualties are likely to come in massive quantities, considering the killing power of today's weapons. For example, during the Gulf War, US ground forces killed roughly one tank or fighting vehicle per minute during armored clashes.[4]

All this leads to an obvious point—the stimulus for self-preservation will be at least as great on future battlefields as it has been on recent ones. In all probability, it will be even greater. Failure to master the inclination to avoid death or dismemberment leads to behaviors ranging from passivity to outright desertion—actions or reactions—leaders must recognize. Accordingly, the traditional supports for the fearful soldier are the presence of comrades, the influence of trusted leaders and confidence in the plan. Unfortunately, the sources of danger are multiplying while the sources of support are disappearing.

Author Richard E. Simpkin remarked that "Whether they are in armoured vehicles, on their feet, or dug in, troops deployed at high density will certainly be pulverized into incapacity and probably 'destroyed' in a markedly more literal sense than Clausewitz intended."[5]

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Battlefield dispersion is a development that has been discussed for decades. Armies today are larger than ever, yet so are the battlefields. The lethality of modern weapons forces units to disperse, causing soldiers to become more isolated than ever before. Isolated in foxholes, vans or armored vehicles, few will have direct physical contact with more than a handful of their peers. Moreover, many small groups will consist of maintenance detachments, air defense teams and engineer squads task-organized away from the parent unit to which they owe their primary loyalty. These factors weaken one of the strongest forces keeping soldiers in the fight—the fear of appearing weak before their buddies. Isolation, real or imagined, allows the fearful soldier to indulge his instinct for self-preservation without the prospect of recrimination.

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Isolation also makes it harder for leaders to exert personal influence over their soldiers. Dispersal, camouflage and the tactical use of terrain render personal example a tool of limited usefulness at best. On the modern battlefield, even the most conspicuous act of bravery will rarely be seen and almost never appreciated for what it entailed. This does not mean feats of raw courage will have no place on future fields; it just implies that their ability to inspire comrades will decline, even as their cost in terms of leader casualties climbs. Other acts of leadership, such as a reassuring gesture, calming remark, inspiring speech or simple display of interest in and understanding for the fearful soldier, will become difficult to apply and likewise limited in effectiveness.

Some may argue that the digital revolution can replace a leader's physical presence through virtual, electromagnetically transmitted reality. This may be true to some extent, because the commander can theoretically be linked to each subordinate. Few would dispute the effectiveness of a calm (or exhortatory) voice over the command network in steadying a unit. In my opinion, however, the digital link is a weak medium for exerting combat leadership for several reasons. From a practical standpoint, the digitized battlefield will severely overload the electromagnetic spectrum, leaving only a very narrow bandwidth for voice communications. Another digital reality is that leaders can neither personalize their messages nor discuss their subordi-

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nates' psychological problems in any depth over the air—the enemy's electromagnetic warfare efforts will make it impossible. Finally, digital links cannot give the effective leader what he needs most—a sensing of his soldiers' moods. No computerized icon has been developed yet to signal the leader that his troops are "freezing up," cowering or simply needing reassurance. For that, a leader must be with his soldiers.

The final bulwark against fear is a soldier's confidence that what he is doing is part of a well-conceived operations plan. Personal sacrifice is easier to bear if one believes it will contribute to success—but no one wants to die uselessly. Supposedly, the dawning of information-age warfare will make it possible to keep everyone fully informed about what is happening. Each soldier, cognizant of the commander's intent and supplied with enough data to fight effectively as part of a fully synchronized team, will be able to operate with minimal guidance. At the stroke of a light pen and push of a button, fragmentary orders and supporting graphics will be transmitted from leaders to their soldiers, eliminating the need for old-fashioned, time-consuming, face-to-face meetings. Apparently, keeping the troops informed will be easier on the digital battlefield, another useful tool in the combat leader's tool box.

However, this argument flies in the face of logic. Given the capabilities afforded the leader by computer technology, rapid shifts in plans, graphics or objectives, disseminated "on the fly," will ultimately reduce, not enhance, the individual soldier's understanding of the operation. What will appear as agility, initiative and versatility to the commander will look like a Chinese fire drill to the squad leader. He will know where to go, fire and pick up supplies, but his grasp of the overall plan will assuredly deteriorate. This makes the subordinate's judgment of possible success or failure largely subjective and intensely personalized, reducing the resolve for self-sacrifice.

As Napoleon Bonaparte once iterated, "The first qualification of a general-in-chief is to possess a

cool head, so that things may appear to him in their true proportions and as they really are."[7]

Danger's final effect is mental paralysis. Combat's violence produces impressions that can reduce the bravest soul to a state of sensory overload. Obviously, this is undesirable in any soldier, but leader paralysis on the modern battlefield is especially harmful. This has always been true, but today's emphasis on mission-type orders and subordinate initiative make any weak links in the chain of command a serious impediment to mission accomplishment. Further, digitization promises to burden leaders with information overload, increasing the chances that soldiers may simply cease to function rationally on the battlefield.

Exacerbating this particular problem is the continuing trend of demanding more complex tactical decision making at lower levels. Battalion and company commanders no longer lead fairly homogenous forces toward relatively simple objectives. Instead, they lead combined-arms teams. Units today are dispersed over a much wider area and operate at higher tempos. Add to this leadership challenge the fact that future success will depend less on planning and more on opportunism. In short, leaders will shoulder more responsibility, receive less-specific guidance, be required to process more information and be exposed to a greater degree of danger than their predecessors. It will be little wonder if many are unable to bear combat stress, seeking refuge in passivity or indecision.

Realizing that fear may become an even more powerful source of friction on future battlefields, we must consider what can be done to reduce its effects. First, we may have to distinguish between what is technically feasible and psychologically desirable. Communication technology may enable howitzers to operate as single guns, but we may want to reconsider further isolating gun crews from their sources of moral support. Similarly, digitized information systems will allow expansion of an individual's span of control, but will he still be able to effectively command 10 or 20 subordinates? Can we reduce a tank platoon to 12 men by introducing autoloaders and still be assured an effective combat leader is somewhere in the mix? Not likely.

Second, it may be time to try to push the level of tactical decision making higher. With rare exceptions, leaders cannot process information and exercise leadership at the same time. Remember, time is a resource that will be in exceedingly short supply in conventional warfare. Reducing the scope for leader initiative from a tactical decision-making standpoint may seem heretical, but it is both feasible and desirable. Information technology reduces the need for independent action, because higher headquarters will be able to see the battlefield better. Conversely, lower-level commanders can spend more time exercising leadership if they are partially freed from the burden of constantly rethinking their roles in the greater maneuver scheme.

Alternatively, separating the functions of command and decision making may be in order. This is not as radical as it seems at first glance. Modern staffs were developed to free commanders from involving themselves in the minutiae of logistics, intelligence and order writing as war grew increasingly complex. Future staffs may have to evolve into agencies exercising decision-making authority, simply to allow commanders to fulfill what remains their fundamental role—leading soldiers into combat.

Finally, doctrine must pay more than lip service to battlefield morale, both in human and organizational terms. Units must be structured and employed to minimize the stress placed on the soldiers who serve in them, not just to maximize their weapons' destructive potential. The segregation of tactics and leadership in our training publications is symptomatic of how deeply we neglect the human factor in war. Consult the tactical series of field manuals at any level. There, you will find commanders described as planners, synchronizers, tacticians and data processors—anything, in fact, but leaders who depend on flesh-and-blood soldiers to win their battles. ***MR***

## NOTES

1. US Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, June 1993), 2-7.
2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 116.
3. Ardant du Picq and Charles Jean Jacques Joseph, "Battle Studies," trans. John Greely and Robert Cotton, in *Roots of Strategy: Book II*, ed. Thomas R. Phillips (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1987), 65.
4. An admittedly unscientific guess, drawn largely from vignettes. Most helpful was retired Army COL Richard Swain's "*Lucky War:*" *Third Army in Desert Storm* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, Combat Studies Institute, 1994).
5. Richard E. Simpkin, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century Warfare* (London: Brassey's Defence, 1989), 50.
6. S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 41.
7. "Military Maxims of Napoleon," ed. Thomas R. Phillips, in *Roots of Strategy: The Five Greatest Military Classics of All-Time* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1985), 430.

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